ADOPTING

OLDER CHILDREN

STATE OF MICHIGAN
FAMILY INDEPENDENCE AGENCY

ADOPTING OLDER CHILDREN

by

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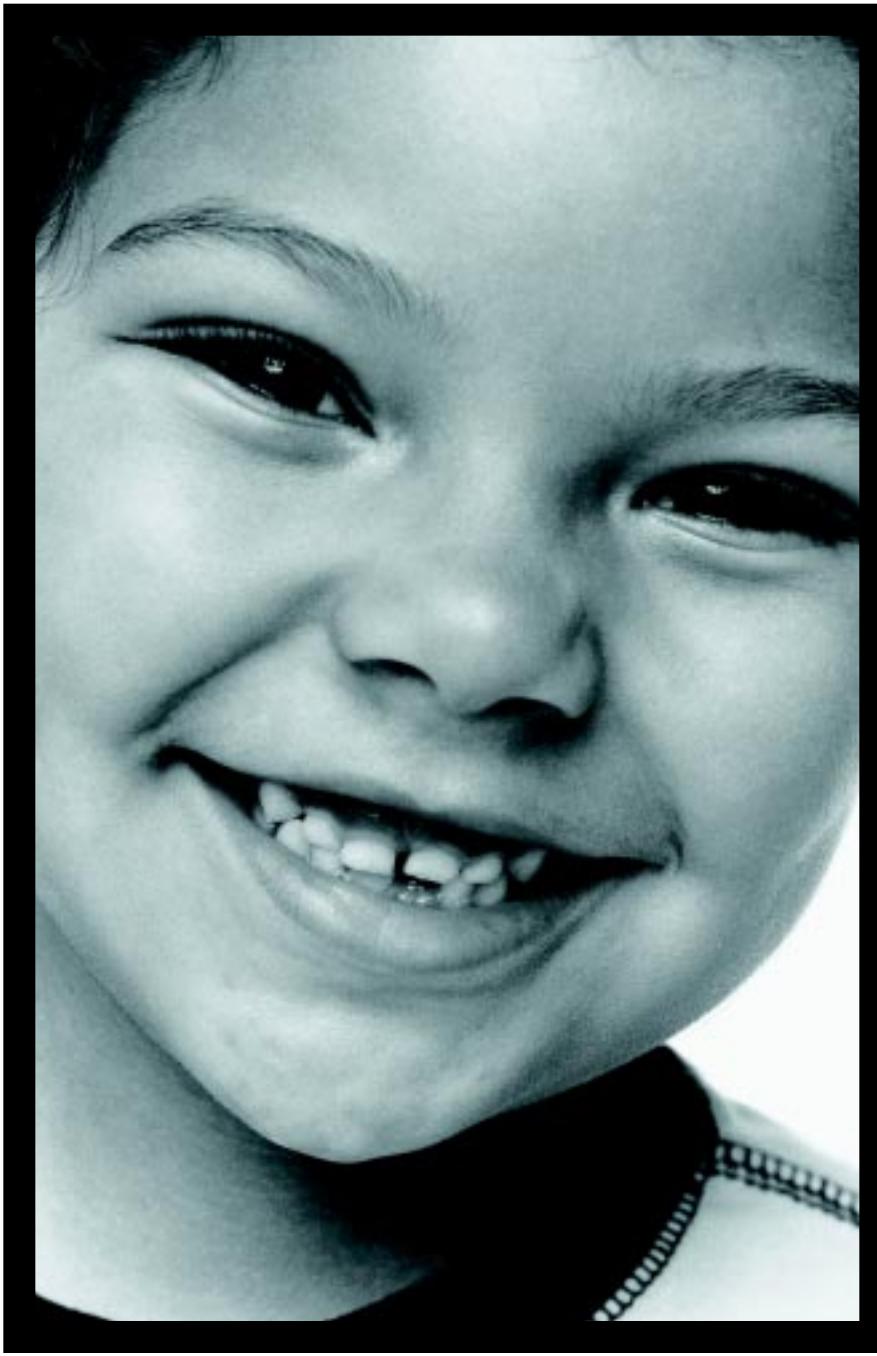

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"MOVING IN"

It takes a long time for the older adoptive child to make you his parents, your home his home. And it takes time, too, for you to make him "your" child. Love isn't instantaneous between man and woman, mother and newborn baby, parents and adoptive child. It grows. It has its ups and downs. There will be moments when you'll wonder how you got into this, and moments when you'll wonder why you waited so long. And in between there will be challenges, victories, a few losses, and lots of satisfaction.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE CHILD BEFORE HE COMES TO YOU?

Whenever an older child is placed for adoption we can take it for granted that he has two things affecting him: First, he has been rejected -- most children for better or for worse are with their biological parents, but he is not; Second, he has felt the constant insecurity of the impermanence of foster care -- he almost certainly saw other children come and go, and perhaps he himself came to and went from a number of foster homes. What do these things mean to the child? They mean that he will expect rejection again and perhaps will provoke it. They mean that he will not believe his stay is permanent with you, and may talk about returning to his foster home or fear being left. They meant that this little boy or girl cannot entirely trust people to be kind and consistent. And they mean that this child has never really had a chance to learn to like himself. Above all, they mean that he is afraid; he is all alone in what has been an uncaring world, and he is very afraid.

WHAT SEPARATION DOES TO CHILDREN: GRIEVING

Separation goes hand in hand with living. Each of us is building relationships and seeing them end all the time. Most of us have lost someone who was very dear: a parent, through death; a friend or a lover through distance; perhaps a husband or wife through the estrangement that leads to divorce. In our hearts we equate any separation with death, and especially for children separation has a death-like mystery and sense of hopeless finality. Research has shown that the grief that follows the loss of an important person takes four stages:

1) *The first stage is shock. We call it the "honeymoon" because the child displays little emotion, occasionally soberness or false happiness. He does everything he's asked to do and never mentions the people he left behind. The only indications of distress are sleeping problems (nightmares, tears), perhaps an inability to eat and almost always a cold or an upset stomach.*

2) *Several weeks later, the second stage sets in. The child begins to come out of his shock and give up his unconscious expectation that soon he will be returned "home," and he begins to protest.*

   He cries easily. He quits being so obedient. He's preoccupied with his loss and he's trying to figure out why this happened to him: was he so bad, so unlovable? He's angry at himself, angry at his lost parents, angry at you. Stagestwo and three may last several months each.

3) *When the child's active efforts to get what he wants are unsuccessful, he feels despair. He has given up. He hurts. He tends to withdraw and to be concerned more with things than with people. He's not able to talk about it and he probably wants to be left alone. But your physical presence is important. It says, "I'm here and I care."*

4) *Finally one day the child wakes up and finds that there is something to look forward to: he has reached the stage of detachment. He is able to seek out love and make an emotional investment in other people. He still thinks about the people he has lost, but not all the time, and realistically -- he can begin to separate fact from fiction.*

It's important to remember that this grieving process may last nine months to a year. It does not always proceed along like a text book, however, and often the stages overlap. More importantly, if your new child comes from a checkered background of move after move, perhaps with an unsuccessful adoptive placement along the way, he may have gotten stuck at some point along the grieving process, often at the "protest" stage, and he may take a long, long time to get past it.Any child will have his very own way of reacting to separation as to any stress, and will handle it in the best way he can.

The Adults

What about you adults while your child is going through this separation experience? It's very hard for adults to see children in pain. Sometimes it seems that adults respond more to their own pain at seeing an unhappy child than they do to the needs of the child. But an important fact is this: Pain is part of the healing process. Grief is natural and appropriate when someone important is lost to us, and adults should not deny a child the right to experience that grief.

There are a few guidelines:

If he has a scrapbook or photo album about his past, keep it available on a shelf for him to look at whenever he wants; hiding it won't "keep his mind off it."

Keep making affection available to him; reach out to him. Don't wait for him to "ask for it."

Don't give up. When the going is roughest is when he needs you most to see him through.

WHO YOU ARE TO THE CHILD

When the older adoptive child first comes to live with you, he will be seeing you differently from what you might imagine. He will not be able to see you clearly as the people you actually are, but instead will relate to you as if a composite of the mommies and daddies he has had in the past. To the extent that these people were similar to you, you will find the child to be very pleasant. To the extent that they were different from you in their expectations and approach, you will be puzzled and displeased by the child's behavior. To the extent that these past mothers and fathers were trustworthy, he will trust you, and no further. This is usually disturbing to parents. You know you are trustworthy and that the new child can safely give his love and his soul over to your keeping, yet he persists in acting as if he suspects you of being the kind of person who would let him down. Remember that these reactions have nothing to do with you personally, and simply reflect the child's life experience. It takes times to unlearn old patterns of behaving and to begin to build new ones.

One of the things that sometimes happens when we are treated as if we were something we are not is that we begin to act the way the other person expects us to. Perhaps you can recall when a teacher was convinced that you were a capable student (or a dumb one) and you tried your hardest to live up to that good opinion (or live down to the bad one). This is sometimes called a "self-fulfilling prophecy," and at times children create self-fulfilling prophecies of their adoptive parents. By acting as if he expects mom and dad to disagree about him, the child unconsciously maneuvers you into playing that role or acting as he expects. He has learned that's how life is, and he sets up situations to create the same results. This is where you need to

be aware of what's happening and to refuse to be "typecast." Your child needs to learn that this home is different, these parents don't play those old games. As he begins to have that assurance he can begin to see you clearly for who you are, and not as repetitions of his past experiences.

HOW HE ACTS AND WHY

What do people do when they're afraid? They try to protect themselves. An adult may talk about his worries to a friend or a counselor, or he may arrange his life so as to avoid the things that make him afraid. A child can seldom do these things so he must find other ways to protect himself. Here are some of the ways:

> *Think about a time when you have been really, really mad! Think about that feeling and what it was that made you react as you did. If you look at it very carefully you will find that at the bottom of every feeling of anger is fear: fear of being harmed, taken advantage of, or robbed of independence; fear of losing our most precious possession, the control of our own destinies. An that is what you see when you see an aggressive, angry, destructive child. You see a desperately frightened child fighting to put himself in control of things, fighting to forget his sense of helplessness. Sometimes he really does want to hurt someone or something else. Then he can feel for awhile that he does have an ability to protect himself and to strike back at a world that hurts him.*
>
> *Other children react to their fears in just the opposite way. They are gentler and less aggressive by nature and are not able to expose themselves to the*

risks taken by the "fighters." So this kind of child protects himself by withdrawing: If the world around him is untrustworthy and he himself is weak, the child simply doesn't take the chance of getting involved with it. Instead he sits in the corner and sucks his thumb; he lies in his bed and rocks back and forth; he clings to you like a toddler and he whines. Like the "fighter," the withdrawn child is also trying to gain control over what happens to him, but he does it by creating his own world.

What about such specific behaviors as lying, stealing, impulsiveness and bedwetting? Those of us who have been brought up in fairly normal families are often shocked at the idea of a child lying or stealing and are amazed at a child over six (and sometimes younger) who still wets the bed and who can't plan ahead enough to stay out of constant trouble. It seems to us that when we have told a child what he is not supposed to do, he ought to be able to make an effort and stop doing it. Yet the kind of child who is placed for adoption after age 3 or 4 usually doesn't stop: he goes right on lying to you about the most obvious things, he steals so that you can't help but know about it, he wets his bed almost every night and/or he continues to walk out in front of cars or leave his bike in the street.

Why does he keep on? He continues his "bad" behavior because it is a part of his adjustment to the world.

LIES

Mike lies with those big innocent eyes because he has never learned to trust adults. In his experience when an adults asked "Who hit Janie?" or "What happened to the matches?" the next thing that happened was that he got in trouble -- perhaps when he wasn't guilty. To a child who doesn't like himself anyway, each criticism is another major rejection. So he has learned to lie, so much so that at times he actually believes the preposterous story he's handing you.

GETTING HIMSELF AND OTHERS IN TROUBLE

Related to telling lies is the way that some children have learned to manage things so that in any interchange between himself and another child he is always the "victim," and the other child gets punished. He is again protecting himself. This is fairly easy to understand, but the other side of the coin is more puzzling. Occasionally there will be a child who invites punishment, who will stand right in front of you and deliberately do something that you have just told him not to. These children have a real problem because they don't know how to get positive attention and when they do get it, it isn't very satisfying to them. The only interaction they have ever learned to have with other people is the fighting - yelling - spanking kind. Nevertheless, even that is better than nothing and they're out to get it.

STEALING

Stealing is rarely what it appears to be. It is almost symbolic. That's why Jackie steals things he doesn't need and could never possibly use; the things he steals represent love to him. He may steal money from his new mother's purse, hot wheels from his new brother, or candy from the corner store. All these possessions help him to feel worthwhile. You are likely to see these same feelings in a much more common form when your child demands gifts from you -- again material things represent caring to him. Often a child who is otherwise making a good adjustment to his new home will become very demanding and "I want"ing when he's facing some new or difficult experience such as beginning school or perhaps being ill.

BEDWETTING

Betwetting is seldom something your child can do much about. It is an unconscious mechanism for the release of tension or anxiety and after all it's probably more socially acceptable than smashing the neighbor's toys. It is annoying , however, and many parents find it hard to believe that he couldn't stop wetting if he really

wanted to. Well, he can't. And what's more he doesn't know why and probably wants to quit more than you want him to.

How can you handle these problems? The key to success is to strike at the real problem and not at the symptom: you need to strive to make the child's world so safe and so rewarding that he doesn't need to cling to patterns of self-protection that he developed way back when. Meanwhile, you can do some direct things. Talk with the child about the behavior you want to see stopped. Ask him if he has any ideas about how you can both work together to change it. Be lavish with your praise when he improves, and understanding but encouraging when he backslides. Find ways to remove him from temptation or to help him avoid situations that are hard for him to handle.

IDENTIFYING

The crucial issue in most adoptive placements of older children is identity: the child's identity with you and your identity with him. Often adoptive parents expect too much too soon, both of themselves and of the child. To begin with, you won't feel the same about the new child as you do about your other children, there won't be that internal parent-child commitment arising magically within you after the first week, or the first month, or even the first six months, in many cases. It must grow gradually, sometimes painfully, in its own way and its own time. The secret is to try not to be horribly disappointed at yourself and to be reassured that love does indeed grow and flower in almost every home where older children are adopted, parents have days (or weeks, or months) when they find they actively ***dislike*** *the new child. The most experienced and successful adoptive parent in the world has moments when he or she would desperately like to just walk out of the house -- leave spouse, kids and the dog -- and never come back. That's normal. And almost always the feeling goes away.*

It'll go away, if you recognize that you have it, realize it's normal, and don't worry too much about it.

Identity from the child's standpoint is also very difficult. Now he must give up much of his attachments to former parents (and fantasy former parents) and begin to make himself a part of you. That's very hard. He may feel he's betraying his beloved (and lost) foster mother when he kisses you goodnight and lets you hold him when he hurts. In some ways he is betraying part of himself when he gives up old ways to "fit into" your family. So there may be a period of active or passive rejection of you as he makes a last-ditch stand against surrender and the important others in his past. He may not want to use your name, he may never offer physical affection, he may set himself apart from the family in a thousand subtle ways. If he can know you accept and respect his need to hold on to his separateness, and if he can see that you still reach out to him without conditions, then he can find his way through to that vital compromise in which he will indeed be a part of you and you will be a part of him.

SETTING LIMITS

Sometimes new parents are afraid to say "no," afraid to say "this is how it's going to be." One of the most important things any parent can learn is that discipline is love in action. Discipline does not mean punishment. It means responsibility, giving some chores or teaching manners, setting a bedtime or insisting on homework. It means providing your child with a structure to live by. Rules are a part of living with other people. They make us more comfortable, give us a reliable base from which to risk life. The adopted child needs discipline more than most because he has so little inside him to rely on.

All this is not at all to say that adoptive children need to be ruled with an iron hand. They do need clear expectations, but expectations they can hope to meet. They do need to know when they're

measuring up, but they seldom can benefit from physical punishment. Consistency, firm guidelines, and lots of praise and support will contribute most to helping your new child adjust.

PUT IT IN WORDS - SHOW IT TOO

One important way you can contribute to your new child's sense of security in your family is to be very demonstrative. Don't assume he knows how you feel. He does not have a backlog of experience that tells him he's valuable, so he doesn't take it for granted. He needs to have it shown to him over and over. What kinds of things need to be said out loud?:

"I love you."
"You're a good person."
"You look nice today."
"You're always going to live here."
"We're never going to leave you."
"You're important to us."
"Mommy will be right back."
"Yes, we love Sherry and Donny,
but we love you, too; we love
each of our children for himself."

And so on.

Most older adoptive children need lots of touching -- hugging, a kiss goodnight or goodbye, being tucked in, a hand on the shoulder, cuddling at TV time, etc. He may at first shy away from such affectionate contact. He may not want to be touched at all, or he may prefer aggressive, rough-and-tumble play-fighting. Although some "wrestling" is normal and healthy, be careful not to let it substitute for all the physical contact the child needs. He should learn that love can be expressed in gentle ways, too. Consistently

make physical contact available to the child, with warmth and gentleness.

There may be other ways, too, to demonstrate your positive feelings and your respect for the child's needs. One adoptive mother drew maps for her four-year-old and for herself so that the child would have tangible evidence that mommy would know how to come and get him after playtime at a friend's house. When you're on the lookout, you'll think of other things that may be reassuring.

A word about negative feelings: If there is one thing adoptive children need, it's clear messages about other people's emotions. And that includes angry feelings. If you get mad, don't try to pretend everything's okay; let the child know. Most experts agree that it's best to try to let the child know you're mad at what he did, rather than at who he is, and to place the emphasis on his having done something unacceptable rather than that he is a bad child. But other than that, go ahead and let him know you're upset. He'll feel better for it.

LISTENING TO WHAT HE MEANS, NOT WHAT HE SAYS

Children, and adults as well, tend to say things they don't mean in a literal sense, while wanting others to understand what they are really feeling. Too often we react to the words and miss the significance of the child's message. This may be because many messages sound like the opposite of what they are, and they "feel" to the adult like rejection.

Your new daughter may say, "I don't have to brush my teeth. You're not my mommy!" Your son may announce loftily that he doesn't like the way you have chores assigned, because "at my foster home we didn't do it that way." These things are worrisome enough, but the greatest threat often comes when the child screams,

"I don't like it here! I'm going back!" or, "I'm going to run away." One child threatened in a fit of anger, "I'm gonna tell the judge I don't wanna live here!".

If you think about what these children are really saying, then if it happens to you, you may be able to respond with something more positive than counter-rejection along the lines of "same to you, kid." The best way to look at the child's hostile-seeming statements is to turn them into questions. Then we have:

"Are you my mommy?"
"Do you care enough to hold me to the rules?"

"Is this home the same as my foster home?"
"Do I have to cling to identification with them,
or can I let myself belong to you?"

"Are you going to let me go (like everyone else)?"

"Do you love me as much (or more) than they did?"

"Will you let me run away?"
"(It feels like you don't love me.)"

"Do you care enough to want to keep me,
(i.e., tell the judge) even though I've been naughty?"

In other words, the moment when the child acts as if he doesn't need you, doesn't want you, and doesn't care how you feel about him -- that's the moment when he needs you the most. He needs you to be the adult, to reach out to him, to meet him more than halfway. That's why it helps to listen to what he means, not what he says.

THE CHILD'S PAST IN THE PRESENT

WHY ISN'T HE WITH HIS ORIGINAL PARENTS?

Parents adopting the older child need to clearly understand why he isn't with his biological parents. There aretwoavenues by which children become free for adoption:

1) ***Voluntary relinquishment -***
The parents decide on their own that adoption is what they want for their child and they sign legal papers asking the agency to find adoptive parents (once the child is placed in your home their legal right to change their decision is ended);

2) ***Termination of parental rights -***
The juvenile court makes the decision that biological parents have forfeited their rights as parents and/or will never be able to provide stable, permanent care for the child. This child is committed to the agency's care for adoptive placement.

The important thing to be aware of is that nobobywants to be a bad parent. At any given point in time each of us is doing the best he can to cope with the demands life makes on us. Some people, no matter how much they would like to, do not have the capacity to parent. Emotionally they are like children themselves. Some people, a few, can realize this and can seek constructively to find better lives for their children through voluntary relinquishment. Others, unfortunately, can only demonstrate their inability to parent so that the courts must intervene.

The point is that when children and biological parents are permanently separated, it is not because those parents were evil, but because they were not competent. And they deserve our compassion and understanding, not our censure.

WHAT DO YOU TELL THE CHILD?

Your adopted child needs to know his history. Don't fool yourself into thinking that because he doesn't talk about his past he doesn't think about it. Talking with your child about his past is like talking about sex: if you're comfortable, the child will be. Think back to what your parents told you (or didn't tell you) about sex. Remember how clearly you knew whether or not you were free to ask questions? Your parents probably thought they were hiding their feelings well. Children know. They notice whether you are uncomfortable with the thought of their biological parents and ties to foster parents.

Many parents say, "We'll wait 'til he asks." With the majority of children you'll be waiting 'til he's 35. Be alert to his nonverbal cues: when he becomes quiet or withdrawn, dreamy, thoughtful, weepy or sad, ask him, "Are you missing your foster parents?" If he says no, fine. At least he knows that you're not afraid to face those feelings with him. Be alert to hints of what's going on inside: he may say he saw a dog like the one the foster family had, or he may boast about the things they used to do. Those are your opening thinking-about-past-times'; what is he thinking?

One of the best ways to help a child gain an understanding of his past experiences and of the ways he came to be with you is through a "story." Written in language appropriate to your child's age it is his very own story, beginning at his beginning and bringing in his foster placement, foster care moves, the reason for adoptive placement and the story of his coming to you.

Perhaps your caseworker can construct a story for your child, or provide you with examples so that you can write your own.

FOSTER PARENTS AND BIOLOGICAL PARENTS

The adoptive child's ties to former parent figures, foster and biological, are often threatening to his new parents. He mopes around missing his "mommy" and "daddy." We quickly retrain him to call them "foster mommy" and "foster daddy" (or "Bill and Ann," etc.). We try to keep him busy to "keep his mind off them." Above all, we worry. (He loves them so much; he misses them so terribly. What a cruel thing to take him away from them. Perhaps he'll hate us for interfering -- or at best he'll be resigned to living here, but his heart will be back there.) The same kinds of feelings go with thoughts of the child's biological parents. (Why does he ask so many questions about them? Why did he say, "You're not my real mommy!"?)

"Will he ever really accept us as his family?", adoptive mothers and fathers ask. The answer is not in Johnny or Jill. It's in you. You can free him to love you by giving him permission to love your predecessors in his life. Remember two things: 1) Love is not exclusive; each of us can love as many people as we can know. There are different degrees and qualities of love but there is no limit and the more people we love, the greater our capacity; 2) It's important that your adopted child loved those who cared for him before you; if he loved them, then you know he has the ability to love you. Let him care; welcome his curiosity. He's healthy and normal in those things at least.

SUPERVISION

"Supervision" tends to be scary to new adoptive parents, even though they know what it's for. When the caseworker comes out you may find yourself hesitating to be really frank. You won't

want to tell the worker you finally lost your temper and smacked Mike on the bottom, or that this week you're wondering if you'll ever be able to really love Sara. One family told their worker each month for six months that things were going along great with their new son, much better than last month (When they were concerned about ...). You may find yourself worried that the worker will suddenly decide to move the child if he doesn't like how you're handling things; or you may feel guilty because you're not living up to the worker's good opinion of you.

Remember that you're not having any feelings that the worker hasn't heard of before. You probably aren't having any problems the worker hasn't lived through with some other adoptive family. Even if you are, another opinion, another way of seeing the situation may be helpful.

And remember, when the agency places a child with you, it's with the assumption that the child is your child. We want it to be permanent and we'll do everything we can to help you build a happy family.

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